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ABSTRACT

Beginning teachers' learning is complex and personal: they learn about themselves as teachers; they fight with newly revealed selves endeavoring to change; and they engage in a struggle that is both emotional and intellectual. This report presents narratives, based on both journals and taped conversations, of the learning experiences of six novice teachers who participated in Beginning Teacher Study Groups; it also presents a smaller, but still significant number of stories from the narrative literature on teaching: published nonfiction accounts of teaching written by teachers themselves. Stories are useful for understanding the sense teachers make of things that happen--ways in which they make sense of a stream of crises and demands; and also for describing possible avenues for teacher learning including learning to move away from absorbing school norms simply by "osmosis," perhaps by glimpsing one's behavior through the eyes of a colleague and thus becoming able to make more conscious choices; juxtaposing old advice and new experience; and struggling with teaching problems. The document concludes with a discussion of 5-year teacher education programs which present opportunities for beginning teachers to continue their connection with a university through an internship year. (Contains 25 references.) (LL)

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NCRTL Special Report

Learning From the First Years of Classroom Teaching: The Journey In, the Journey Out

by Helen Featherstone

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Helen Featherstone, associate professor of teacher education at Michigan State University, is a senior researcher with the National Center for Research on Teacher Learning. She is at present particularly interested in the teaching and learning of mathematics and the role conversation can play in learning.

Late one afternoon in January, the four members of my Beginning Teacher Study Group and I are perched on small chairs around the library table in a public elementary school that has kindly offered us space for our meetings every other week. Suzanna Tierney,[1] who has now been teaching kindergarten in two city schools (one in the morning and one in the afternoon) for four months, begins to reflect on her preparation for teaching. In a part of the country where applicants outnumber teaching positions by a very substantial margin, she feels lucky to have gotten a job. She attributes her good fortune to her previous experience in day care. The personnel officer, she suspects, assumed that her year and a half working with four-year-olds would have prepared her well for kindergarten teaching. But Tierney has not found this to be true: "Day care is a whole different story than school," she asserts.

"Oh, sure," someone agrees. "Because you can just let them do what they want."

Tierney nods, "Whatever. Anything that's creative. Anything that's fun. And I never interrupt to say 'hurry up.' It's all developmental."

As a kindergarten teacher, she explains, she feels and acts totally differently. She talks about Sophie, who works slowly and carefully. Tierney sees herself constantly rushing the little girl, urging her to finish up. Absorbed in her task, Sophie doesn't always hear her teacher when she asks for "eyes up here." "And, of course," Tierney concludes, in a voice heavy with self-mockery, "That's when I get mad. Because I want them to jump when I blink."

[1]The names of teachers participating in the Beginning Teacher Study Group have been changed.

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Contrast Between Vision and Goals

After a long pause, the young teacher begins to talk about the contrast between the visions she brought to her classroom in September and the goals she finds herself embracing ambivalently four months later:

> Going from day care, where it was all play-related, I came into kindergarten feeling that I wanted to keep that, and not be so structured, feeling that kindergarten was *so* structured. But, I don't know, my kids walk down the hall, and I watch other kids walk down the hall, and I really want them to be school-aged kids. You know: The other side of me wants them to be prepared for first grade.
>
> We had an art teacher come in the other day and she was talking about doing stuff with a brush and dotting things and all the kids were moving around and they started to bump into each other. I started to say "Stay where you are sitting and don't move around." And she looked at me and said, "Let them do it. That's just natural." For me it was just a slap in the face of "Suzanna, you are losing all conception of creativity and natural rhythms."
>
> I go back and forth.

A few days earlier, telling the story in her teaching journal, she put her feelings even more vividly: "At that moment I felt like a drill sergeant."

Tierney seems to see herself learning from the experience of being part of two rather traditional school faculties without quite having decided that she wants to follow this path. When the art teacher gently reproves her she realizes that she has abandoned her vision of a looser, more developmental kindergarten and is now more fully acculturated than the natives. But identifying the problem doesn't solve it: If she feels bad when she faces the extent of her "learning," she still wants her students to conform to school norms and succeed by the standards of the institution. She worries, she says, about "these curriculum things that they have to know by year end," and about the judgments her colleagues will make: "I get so nervous that they are going to go into first grade and the teacher will say, 'Uh, oh, that's another one of Miss Tierney's kids.'"

The research literature on beginning teachers tells us that during their first years in the classroom many teachers experience major difficulties with managing student behavior and that they respond by becoming more authoritarian, more conservative, and less child-centered. Researchers attribute a good part of this change to the management-custodial orientation of schools, the overwhelming nature of the beginning teacher's task, and to socialization by other teachers (Bulloughs, 1989; Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986; Veenman, 1984).

Self-Knowledge: Main Fruit of Teaching Experience

During the last few years I have been reading and listening to the stories beginning teachers tell and thinking about what these novices have to say about their own learning. As a result, I now think somewhat differently about the lessons of early teaching experience: I have come to feel that self-knowledge is a major fruit—perhaps *the* major fruit—of early teaching experience, that the loudest of the voices urging strict discipline may come from inside the novice's head and that the struggle to manage the behavior of young people is intimately bound up with the struggle to understand and change the self.

The narratives that have led me to these conclusions come from two places. I have drawn most of my stories from the journals and taped conversations of six novice teachers who participated in two Beginning Teacher Study Groups that I organized and led during 1987-88 and 1988-89. Both of these groups met every other Thursday afternoon for the major part of the academic year; some members of the first group

continued to meet with me during their second year of teaching. A smaller but still significant number of stories come from the narrative literature on teaching: published nonfiction accounts of teaching written by teachers themselves.

Telling Stories

These stories will not, of course, give us an objective picture of what or how teachers learn from classroom experience. No one who lives through an experience as intense and as extended as the first years of classroom teaching imagines that she can be objective about it. In addition, teachers' narratives are selective: People learn, as Tierney tells us, without realizing what is happening; they also learn things that they never choose to talk about. In addition, these stories reflect the experiences only of a fortunate few who were lucky enough to have the time and the audience for storytelling. Despite these limitations, they are useful for the enterprise of understanding the sense teachers make of their own experience.

For stories are the product of our efforts to make some sense of our lives. Often they contain our best wisdom in its most complex yet most accessible form. When we distill that wisdom into maxims, we lose much of the richness of what we have learned, and often tell readers no more—or, indeed, less—than they already know. Our story embeds what we have learned in all its rich complexity; the story changes as our understanding of it changes.

In telling stories we create a space *outside* of the relentless stream of experience and demands. We represent both our understandings and the contexts which have created them, streamlining a series of lived events, selecting salient details to highlight. Sometimes our "understandings" are no more than our confusions—our failure to make sense of what is happening to us. Sometimes they represent emerging insights, conjectures, propositions. The stories are both a means to understanding—we hear our own stories with ears made new by the stories themselves and by the audience's response to it, as Jill McConaghy (1991) demonstrates so magnificently in her account of another teacher group—and an end, a representation of our interpretation of experience.

Stories help us to see the sorts of things that happen to beginning teachers and the ways in which they make sense of the stream of crises and demands. My experience with listening to and retelling the stories of parents with disabilities (Featherstone, 1980), another group of adults receiving an often-painful education at the hands of the young, has convinced me that these stories echo very convincingly in the ears of others who share their situation but have fewer opportunities to tell their tales.

Learning From Experience

I find Tierney's experience particularly poignant because I am teaching Exploring Teaching, an introductory course for undergraduates who are considering a career in education. As part of an effort to get these sophomores to look at teaching afresh and to reconsider their assumptions about what teaching involves, I ask them to think about what they will need to know as teachers, and how they might go about learning it. My students are conscientious; they intend to study hard, to pay close attention to their methods courses and to attend to their distribution requirements, but they are firmly—and eloquently—convinced that they will learn the most important lessons about teaching from classroom experience.

For the most part, working teachers agree with them: They say they learned to teach through teaching (Lortie, 1975) and that day-to-day encounters with students—rather than inservice workshops or university courses—continue to

provide them with their best opportunities to grow and improve their skills (Johnson, 1990).

Many teacher educators are a good deal less sanguine about the lessons of experience. They have worked hard to enlarge the ideas about teaching that their students have brought with them to the university—ideas bred from their own experiences as students in elementary and secondary schools and from years of immersion in the larger culture (Lortie, 1975)—only to see them return to similar schools, either as university students completing the field components of teacher education courses or as teachers, and relearn from their experience that schools are places where students work through their basal readers and math texts and where teachers arrange the environment so that the journey is as pleasant, orderly, and predictable as possible (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1986). "More often than not," write Robert Floden, Margret Buchmann, and John Schwille (1987), "life teaches people that they have to fit themselves into the scheme of things" (p. 489).

Pam Grossman's (1989) case studies of three liberal arts graduates suggests that men and women who enter teaching without education courses may fare even worse, learning from their classroom encounters with students only that they do not enjoy teaching.

What Do People Actually Learn?

Prospective teachers often speak as though they will learn to teach in much the same way that B. F. Skinner's pigeons learned to peck at the right place to get grain. They expect to try out approaches to teaching, incorporating those that work into their repertoires while abandoning those that do not. They hope that the positive and negative reinforcements provided by quiet and productively engaged children learning the target information and skills on the one hand, and noisy, bored, ignorant children poking their neighbors with rulers on the other will show them the path that "works for them."

Maintaining Control

Certainly people as well as pigeons learn some things this way: I turn the flame low while sautéing garlic because I have tried high and medium heat with poor results. Although we could, in theory, experiment in a classroom in much the same way one does at the stove, in reality the experimentation itself may create so many problems that the beginner learns very little about the effect of different approaches. Not long after her encounter with the art teacher, Suzanna Tierney confided in her journal that she was having great difficulty maintaining control of her classroom and keeping her patience:

> I've got to sit down and devise a new management program. Up until now, I've been trying a little of everything. I haven't really thought of one major plan. I think the kids sense this lack of consistency.
>
> This lack of consistency is my problem with other parts of teaching. I feel as though I'm trying out so many different styles of teaching that I don't have the consistency of one particular style. I know that structure and consistency are *the* most important factors in management in a classroom. But I also want to try out different ways of doing things to make sure I don't miss out on anything that might work better. (Jan. 8, 1988)

Tierney wanted to learn. She had hoped she wouldn't need a formal management system in kindergarten; she abandoned her experimental stance a little wistfully, but with a conviction that it was working neither for her nor for her five-year-olds.

But even though Tierney concluded after a few months of teaching that her classroom could not be used as a laboratory, she still believed 12 months later, after teaching for a year and a half, that she was a far better teacher now than she had

been when she started out, and that experience had made the difference. The changes seemed immense, global; she tried to make them more concrete for me by talking about decisions she made each day as she taught.

"Well, you come in the morning with your plans. But things don't go that way, and you have to change your plans. Like, say I had this really creative art project planned. But when the kids came in they were really hyper and wired. *Now* I wouldn't do it. I'd do cut and paste or something."

"And last year you would have just plowed ahead?" I asked, checking to be sure I understood her point.

Tierney laughed. "Yeah, I probably would have."

I groped towards a clearer understanding of exactly *how* she felt she had changed. "Because you didn't have enough experience to improvise? Or because you wouldn't have been able to read the kids and know when it would be a disaster?"

Tierney considered the question for a moment. "Both, probably." She paused thoughtfully, and then began to talk about the previous year:

> Last year, every time I taught a lesson, or did a project, it was for the first time.
>
> When I was in college, there was this one teacher, she was very good—the best I had, I think. She was always giving us these hypothetical situations. She'd say, "What if you were doing something, and some kid started to do something—something different, you know? What would you do?"
>
> And I'd say, "I'd go on with the lesson" and she'd say, "What if three kids were doing it?"
>
> "I'd still keep on."
>
> And she'd keep going: "Well, what if *everyone* did it?"
>
> So I'd say, "Well, I guess I'd stop. I'd do something else."
>
> And she'd say, "And would that be okay?"
>
> And I'd say, "No. No, it wouldn't be."
>
> She was a great one for going with the flow, for doing whatever got the kids' attention and interest.

At this point, I felt I was beginning to understand a bit more about what Tierney saw herself learning from her year and a half of teaching: "So it wasn't just that you didn't know anything else to do or that you couldn't read their signals. You were *disposed* to continue."

"Yes." She nodded emphatically. "Yes, I'm very much disposed to finish things I have started. I felt that if something was planned, we *should* do it. And they should just *learn* that at reading time we *read*."

Here Tierney paused for a moment before continuing. "Being spontaneous is a real struggle for me in the rest of my life, too. Sometimes on Saturday morning I'll get up and I'll think, 'It would be fun to go out to breakfast.' I'll think about who I might call to go out with. But then I'll think, 'No, I was going to do my laundry and clean. I should get my work done and play later.'"

"Only later never comes?"

She grinned, "Or if it does, I don't feel like playing any more."

Tierney, like many other teachers, claims to have learned "everything" from experience. The example she gives, and the comments she makes about this example, point us in interesting directions when we begin to explore the scope and complexity of that "everything." What does

Tierney learn, and how does she learn it? I want to look briefly at some of the themes echoing through her story and then consider the way they manifest themselves in the narratives of other beginning teachers.

Looking Inward

When we examine Tierney's story, we find that an important part of what this young teacher sees herself learning concerns herself and the way her own character affects her teaching. During her first year in the classroom, Tierney taught hundreds of new lessons. Some of them succeeded. But as she watched other lessons, which she had prepared with equal care, fall apart, she began to see that her determination to brave all adversity in order to proceed with the scheduled activity set her and her students up for failure. She learned something about teaching—that it is important to respond flexibly to students and to take their moods and preferences into account—*but she learned this in the process of learning about herself.*

Often the most powerful stories of beginning teachers, the ones that suggest that the writer has moved a significant way along the road to becoming a real educator, are those that involve learning, or verifying, some truth about the self. These stories usually include some sort of encounter with the outside world. The real drama, however, is interior.

The Interior Drama

Tina DeFranco, for example, in a meeting of another Beginning Teacher Study Group, described an experience that had changed her whole feeling about her job. DeFranco had been struggling along for three months in virtual isolation. The reputation and rhetoric of her school—it is in a wealthy Midwestern suburb where, like Lake Wobegon, "all the children are above average"—reinforce her loneliness and anxiety. When, in the orientation meeting for new teachers, an administrator explained that the school system had received over 4,000 applications for 10 jobs and had every confidence that this hand-picked cadre of rookies would become outstanding teachers, DeFranco wanted to sink through the heating vent. Listening between the lines, she heard the principal and the superintendent telling her that she was not to have any troubles. So, much as she wanted some advice on curriculum and management, she kept her problems to herself, afraid of how the principal and other teachers would respond to hints of difficulty.

Early in November the school system sent all its first year teachers to a daylong regional conference for novices. On her way home from the last workshop, DeFranco stopped at school to pick up her students' papers—she had asked the substitute to leave them on her desk. As she headed back out the door, her arms laden with children's work, she spied a note in her mailbox. The message was brief: Her students had missed their scheduled music enrichment class, because when the music teacher came to pick them up, they had already gone outside for recess. The substitute had not known about the music enrichment class because DeFranco had failed to put it into her schedule book. "The paper," she told the Study Group, "was covered with question marks." It bore the principal's signature.

Wondering how this could have happened, DeFranco returned to the classroom to examine her schedule book; there she found that she had entered "music enrichment" under the wrong day.

> I worried about this all night. I thought "She's really going to be angry with me. I'm going to be in all kinds of trouble because I had it on the wrong date."
>
> So I went in early in the morning and I said, "I'm really sorry about yesterday."
>
> And she said, "Well, what about yesterday?"

"Well," I said, "about not scheduling it. About not having it in my book."

She said, "Having what in your book?" She didn't even *know*.

And I said, "You mean you're not going to fire me or anything?"

She said, "Oh, that. We'll just reschedule it."

And I had just stewed about it all night.

DeFranco had talked repeatedly about her worries, and had told the Study Group that both her husband and her friends were urging her to relax. She wanted to follow their advice, and yet . . .

This incident brought their point home. She began to see the ways in which she was magnifying dangers, seeing disapproval where there wasn't any. She continued to put in long hours in preparation, but the contrast between her fantasy and the humdrum reality convinced her that she had been blowing the problems up out of proportion to the reality. "I feel a lot more confident." Her problems began to seem manageable, and when she wanted advice she now went to her principal who gave her support and useful counsel.

DeFranco had learned about the school, but her most important learnings concerned herself. She now knew that she was apt to worry unnecessarily. The first lessons had to remain provisional for a while: She could not yet know exactly how forgiving the school was, nor could she safely generalize what she had learned to other settings. But the second lesson helped her to evaluate her perceptions of parents and other teachers as well as the principal. Indeed, she told the group with her next breath that her conferences with parents, which had been uniformly positive, had reinforced her confidence in herself.

Personal Weaknesses

As they assume full responsibility for a class for the first time, new teachers identify personal weaknesses to watch for and guard against. Four months of watching herself made Tierney worry about her own judgment and impartiality. Although guardedly optimistic about a new approach to classroom management, she worried about whether she would be able to mete out rewards and punishments fairly. "I feel sometimes like I have the power to be so judgmental in reacting with my kids," she confided to her journal. Reading the entry, I shouted a silent cheer: Experience has given Tierney a valuable insight. It had shown her that when things went badly, she was apt to come down hard on children. Regardless of how she decides to approach the problem of improving her students' behavior, she needs to know this about herself if she is to teach well.

We know, both from research (Bulloughs, 1989; Ryan et al., 1980; Veenman, 1984) and from first-person accounts (Decker, 1969; Herndon, 1965; Kohl, 1967; Ryan, 1970), how many problems plague the beginning teacher. But it is also true that, precisely because teaching is an intense experience which is quite different from anything this adult has done before, the first year of teaching is, ideally, a voyage of self discovery or "education." Just as we learn about our tools when we use them, we learn about ourselves as we watch ourselves attempting something new and difficult. Teaching calls for different spiritual, social, emotional and intellectual qualities than "studenting," and so the attempt to teach shows us ourselves in a somewhat new light.

During my own first year in the classroom I taught first graders in Dorchester, Massachusetts. I remember thinking, as my six-year-olds and I settled into some routines and the initial terrors wore off, "The most difficult thing about this job is that each day it confronts me with parts of my own personality that I do not particularly like and that

I have previously managed to conceal or ignore." The thought recurred throughout the year. I was, I found, far less patient than I had previously imagined and considerably more controlling. However much I believed in allowing students to explore materials and find their own ways into reading and math, it was often hard for me to give them the freedom to do these things. I struggled against myself almost as hard as I struggled against the rules and expectations of a rigid school system.

Combating Personal Dispositions

Tierney's learning went beyond simple identification of a personal disposition and an ongoing examination of the ways in which this attachment to a preconceived plan interfered with her other teaching goals. It involved a *battle to change* her behavior and ultimately her self. As she became convinced that when she ignored the signals from students she doomed herself and everyone else to a difficult morning, she struggled to be more spontaneous and responsive in the classroom. This battle mirrored—and perhaps prompted or reinforced—an effort to be more open and flexible in her personal life.

Written Narratives of Others

Written narratives of other beginning teachers provide examples of other such struggles. In the late 1960s Sonny Decker, a young graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, took a job teaching in a high school in downtown Philadelphia (Decker, 1969). The school provided her with all the challenges that descriptions of inner city secondary schools have led us to expect. Some of her own habits compounded the difficulties: "I'm a talker. It's so easy to rattle on, making terribly important points, and so easy to forget that kids will give you about ten minutes of that kind of self-indulgence before they shut you off" (p. 38). This insight came coupled with the realization that the lesson plans she had been taught to write in graduate school but had then rejected as pedantic and not "cool" could help her to discipline her tendency to keep the spotlight on herself.

> It took about a month of blundering before I gave in and wrote a real lesson plan. Funny, how the discipline of stating your ways and means on paper forces you to really teach. And if you've written it all out, you can step back and look at it before show time, to see exactly what's going on. That's where you can really save a lesson. There's got to be a balance between how much the teacher talks, how much kids work alone, and how much interaction there is. (p. 18)

Kim Marshall, another Ivy League graduate of the late 1960s, took a job teaching in an inner city Boston elementary school. In *Law and Order in Grade 6-E* (1972), Marshall describes a disastrous and demoralized year in which children fought, ran around the classroom, and stole from one another, while he tried to find ways to teach them something. He saw that other teachers could silence the unruly hordes simply by walking into his classroom, and he attempted "the shouting kind of repression" and the equally time-honored "stream of busywork" (p. 18).

> There were still regular explosions and confrontations, but this method took the pressure from outside the class off me and made the holding action more bearable. It also made me more ashamed than ever to call myself a teacher. (p. 19)

Eventually Marshall confronted himself: "Clearly I wasn't cut out to be a conventional, stand-up teacher in this kind of school" (p. 31). But as he struggled to find a style of teaching that he could manage, he also began to change—not only his style, but his personality.

> I was being forced to abandon the luxury of a soft, understated personality by my demanding and often threatening environment, by being front stage for nearly six hours a day. I slowly developed into more of an actor and a performer, more of an extrovert, and grew a thicker skin and a different kind of detachment and humor. (p. 32)

The language Marshall uses to describe these changes suggests that the outcome is not entirely of his own choosing—he seems less sure than either Sonny Decker or Suzanna Tierney that he is the architect of his fate. Many beginning teachers feel as Marshall seems to: They have struggled with themselves and with their students, their administrators, and their circumstances. The resulting changes are not necessarily those they would have chosen at the outset, but they "work."

The Emotional Sphere

These two points—that self-knowledge is one of the major fruits of the beginning teacher's experience, and that the learning involves not simply observation but genuine struggle with portions of yourself—link closely with a third theme: that the learning involves work that is emotional as well as intellectual.

The foundations of Tierney's learning were laid before she entered her first kindergarten classroom, during a course she took for certification. Her professor had repeatedly suggested that a good teacher takes cues from students, capitalizing on their interests and inclinations. But examining the merits of this proposition was not a simple matter of watching to see what happened when she abandoned plans for planting seeds in paper cups in order to take the children outside to look for signs of spring. It required probing dearly held beliefs about how one ought to live and what adults ought to teach children about self-discipline. It meant confronting a feeling that she would be retreating, displaying cowardice in the face of the enemy, if she gave in to the momentary impulse to substitute play for work, the simple for the complex, the attractive for the useful. It meant changing the way she *felt* as well as the way she thought.

Probing Beliefs

Mimi Gelb, a member of Tierney's Beginning Teacher Study Group, encountered similar demons as she struggled to find a way to teach second grade which seemed both right and satisfying. In September of her second year she described the long mornings of reading instruction—she had five groups—as tense and unsatisfying: "I feel as though I'm on an assembly line." She would work with one group, struggling to focus their attention on the task at hand, to get them to read with expression and to learn the target vocabulary, only, it seemed, in order to repeat the process with the next group.

And while she moved through these mechanical and repetitive tasks, she monitored the rest of the room, making sure that the noise level did not rise too high, and that the groups working at their seats stayed on task. When children at one table got too noisy—as they inevitably did several times each morning—she rang a bell, called out, "Detention, Group Four," and set a timer for the five minutes of absolute silence now required of these six children. As a hush fell over the room and she turned back to the group of seven-year-olds before her, she found herself wondering, "Is this all there is? Twenty more years of 'Detention, Group Four'?"

In October, however, Gelb began to feel better about her teaching. She suspected that part of this improvement was physical: She had begun the school year with a cold which had finally cleared up. But part of it reflected real thought, a successful attempt to reassess her situation and figure out what actually needed changing. She made some substantive improvements in her teaching, but she also began to analyze more objectively the noise that she had been battling.

> I'm thinking it's not so bad for the class to be noisy. . . . I used to focus on "Oh, the noise, I'm not being effective." And I still feel that: When they are quiet I think, "Ah, that's nice." But when they do get

> noisy I look around and see what they are doing. If they are interacting with each other, and it's productive, I'm not getting all excited about it.

As the weeks went by, Gelb's ability to tolerate—and even sometimes celebrate—what she now termed "busy noise" was fortified by her realization that because *she* had changed over the 12 months she had taught, the meaning of classroom noise had changed. "Before, when they were noisy, I worried that the class would get out of control. But I realize now that I have control of the class and that if I want quiet, I can get it." When she saw that she *had* control, she did not need to exercise it as often.

Gelb, like Tierney, needed to change the way she *felt* as well as the way she *thought* about her teaching. This meant reanalyzing the meaning of noise in her classroom. It meant thinking about her experience. But it also meant changing the way she felt about what was happening—because as long as she felt as though she was on an endless treadmill, condemned to repeat certain dreary routines over and over until liberated by retirement, she could bring few of her many strengths to the service of her teaching. The intellectual and the emotional work went hand in hand.

How It Felt to Lose Control

A story from the classroom of another member of this Beginning Teacher Study Group sounds the same theme, with a new twist. Carol Holtz had dreamed of becoming a teacher for 20 years, but by the time she finally got her elementary certification, several of her four children were in graduate school. She felt fortunate to land a teaching job several months later.

Holtz looks for the bright side in any situation, but her job was a difficult one. She and her first-grade students shared an enormous classroom space with three other classes. Because of the room's acoustics, the other teachers had decided to keep all the youngsters working quietly on academics every morning and to monitor the noise level closely even in the afternoon. Holtz had more than her share of slow learners and difficult children; unable to adjust classroom tempo and activities as she wanted to, she fought frequent brushfires.

In early spring, her daily journal described a particularly disagreeable confrontation:

> At the end of the day, we played a [math] flash card game—they did quite well except that Edwin got very angry and belligerent when he lost. He gave me some unnecessary foul backtalk and raised an inappropriate digit. I got angry. He had to put his name on the board, head down and he cried. He deserved it! I told him that if he wanted to survive 1st grade, then he'd better never do that to me again!
>
> I talked to his mom, told her what happened and she was very upset that he would do that. She will also punish him at home and I'll be getting a written apology tomorrow.
>
> The rest of the kids were shocked and mad at him. Some just looked at him and others wouldn't talk to him even when school let out. I hoped he learned a lesson from this. I know I did. If it happens again I will send him to the office for some of [the principal's] conversation; plus some more drastic disciplinary action.

A year later, in an interview, Holtz reflected on the journal entry, and on what she had meant when she said that she had learned a lesson. Rereading the entry, she registered shock at the unvarnished anger it so clearly expresses. "Gosh, this brings back so much. Yick." She drew a deep breath and tried to reconstruct the meaning the event had had for her at the time: "Even though I had been challenged in other ways, that was my first open very defiant situation."

Surprised, I reminded her of Brendan, an even more difficult student than Edwin. She shook her head:

> With him I never saw this sort of defiance. It was defiant, but [it wasn't nasty]. He would always do it, but you could tell he was upset about having to do it. He would do it at a slower pace than normal. Or when he had this little sense of freedom, he would just take off to do something else, quick.
>
> Whereas Edwin just openly defied me. In front of the whole group. So I felt I had to do something right then and there. I wished I hadn't gotten angry because in a sense I let him—because he got the response he wanted. Had that happened again . . . Well, it did happen again: He hit me. He swung back, and swung around fast like that [she demonstrated]. And I handled it completely differently: I just took him by the shoulder, and sat him down, and told him, "When you get control of yourself, we'll talk."
>
> And I wished I had done this the first time. Because by my getting angry and exploding, I think, first of all, it might have helped me with some of the other kids, because they found out that I could get mad. But it didn't help the situation with him at all. Because it just allowed him to think, "Ah, ha, I found her breaking point."
>
> And then I was upset for the rest of the day. With myself and with him. And I knew better than that. It was just the straw that broke the camel's back: I had just about had it at that point.

Reading Holtz's journal, I had assumed that her learning was intellectual—that she had *seen* something new about handling explosions, or some other aspect of the situation. But Holtz's commentary tells a different story: She already "knew better." She knew that she did not ever want to display anger in the classroom. That was why, despite months of provocation, she had not exploded before. But the confrontation showed her, in vivid technicolor, exactly how it felt to explode at a child. She rode the emotional roller coaster of her own rage, complete with the bitter aftertaste, and she resolved not to ride it again.

Experience taught Holtz's heart what her head already knew. It taught her how it *felt* to lose control. She already knew that she did not want to do this, but as soon as she exploded at Edwin she knew it in a different way. The next time Edwin defied her, she was prepared emotionally *as well as* intellectually. She handled the situation quite differently.

The Downward Path to Wisdom?

Tierney's story prompts a fourth observation, one which, in a sense, brings us back to where we began: The education beginning teachers get from experience is often a mixed bag. Tierney has clearly learned some important things about herself as a teacher, and she has taken arms against dispositions that limit her flexibility and responsiveness. She has learned to "read" and respond to her students. So far, so good. But the particular example she chooses suggests another aspect of the journey, an education in Henry Adams's ironic sense. For, in the case she describes, attending to children's cues means choosing the mundane over the adventurous—playing it safe.

The "really creative" project is abandoned in favor of cut-and-paste. A sensible decision, no doubt, if the children are "wired," but one that is likely to create, at least for the moment, a drabber learning environment. The example echoes the story that Tierney told a year earlier about her encounter with the art teacher; she still sounds very much concerned with meeting the school's expectations that classes be quiet and orderly. What will become of the more creative art project? Will Tierney scrap cut and paste another day, when she notices the children's serene mood, and dig through her closet for the abandoned materials? Perhaps. But perhaps not.

The discussion from the next to the last meeting of the first Beginning Teacher Study Group, three

weeks before the participants concluded their first year of classroom teaching, illustrates the mixed fruits of the rookie's experience. Asked what she planned to do differently next year, Tierney thinks immediately about management:

> Next year? I think behavior management would be a biggie for me. . . . I feel that, at this point, my kids have me pegged. And I'm kind of a wimp. I really believe that. Even now, when I get angry, they'll be good for half an hour [she laughs], and then it will turn right back around and they'll be little pills again. You know, they really have me pegged. Whereas next year I would be a lot more structured. Just really not give them an inch, *not give them an inch*. Whereas now, like we talked about at the beginning of the year, consistency is so hard for me.

Consistency Strikes a Chord

The word "consistency" strikes an immediate chord with Dianne Furlong, who responds to Tierney by analyzing her own failures in this department:

> For a while I'm just a real stickler. And then, some days when I correct papers, I forget to look at penmanship, so it might get messy. Well, then they think that, "I got away with it," you know. It gets progressively worse, and today I just said, "Wait." And we started right back over: "Remember how you formed this letter? Remember this?" You know. And it was my fault, because I didn't keep on top of everything. I just felt I couldn't. It would be impossible.

The first issues to surface, then, concern the management of children's behavior. Hard on their heels comes the issue of managing and disciplining oneself—for consistency seems to require self-monitoring and restraint that are all but superhuman.

Then slowly the conversation moves toward more academic—and intellectual—concerns. Furlong, Tierney, and Gelb resolve to plan time better next year; they are now rushing through basal readers, trying to finish grade-level books before June. Gelb and Holtz debate the importance of handwriting: Gelb asserts that other teachers will overlook a child's faults if he or she writes neatly and that employers care about handwriting: And yet, says Holtz, "If it's legible and you can read it, there are other things that are more important than perfect handwriting. It's not a sign of intelligence."

After some further talk about what really does matter to them now as teachers, Furlong decides that next year she will give reading a higher priority:

> Some days, I would skip reading. You know, to do other things. Reading isn't my favorite subject and I think it should be, because it's so important. And I feel like I want to take a couple of courses in reading or something, just so I feel like I know more about it. So I feel like I'm more, I don't know, a better teacher.
>
> Maybe I would like to do it then.

She is also determined, she says, to change the way she teaches spelling, moving away from the spelling book and emphasizing her students' writing more.

Reexamining Priorities

Holtz then announces that she intends to revise her reading program for next year. She is not happy with the basal reader and has been delighted by what her students have been able to do with creative writing throughout the year. Her six-year-olds have written some wonderfully imaginative stories; they have also learned an astonishing amount about punctuation and the like. She says that she feels competent in the management of time and children's behavior:

> But I want to work on reading. I hate teaching reading. I find it extremely boring. And I'd rather teach it in different ways. So I'd like to look at what I would like them to do in creative writing and coordinate the language arts.

All these beginners have learned some things about how to fulfill the expectations they perceived for orderly classrooms and tidy handwriting. But they have also begun to reexamine priorities, to plan ways to increase their own competence in certain subject areas, and to work on ways to teach reading that are more interesting to themselves and their students.

These stories about learning suggest that all beginning teachers find some sort of answer to the problems that trouble them, even if the answers are not the ones that teacher educators would hope for. But of course this is not true. While most beginning teachers certainly learn to manage some of their problems, many begin their second year in the classroom with important questions hanging in the air. Experience has posed the question; it has not provided any answers.

What Makes Learning From Experience Likely?

What circumstances make it possible or likely that a teacher will learn from experience? The question is too large and too important to be really answerable, but it seems to me that we can at least shape some working hypotheses by looking at what beginners say about *how* they have managed to learn what they have. And here again Tierney's story echoes some of the themes to be found in the narratives of other teachers.

Suzanna Tierney's Story

To begin with, Suzanna Tierney reminds us that outsiders can play an important role in shaping what teachers learn from experience. More specifically, she highlights the importance of outsiders who challenge the obvious or suggest a different way of looking at something. Without such dissenting voices, we will tend to learn from experience—as Floden, Buchmann, and Schwille (1987) warn—the obvious, the commonplace, the culturally acceptable. More, in short, of what we already know.

Tierney is, she tells us, inclined to be inflexible once she has made a plan. Her inflexibility is more than habit; it is almost a moral stance: In her bones she feels that both she and her students *ought* to stick to what has been planned, that to change course merely to accommodate a newly surfaced interest or inclination is to embrace defeat. Dr. Bancroft, who she describes as "one of the best professors" she has had, has challenged Tierney's view that a teacher ought to finish a scheduled lesson regardless of student response. She did not immediately convince Tierney.

Rather she planted the seed of an idea, of a different way of looking at plans and of the relationship between children's momentary and shifting interests and classroom activity. In the beginning, Tierney reports, this idea did not influence her behavior. But as time went on—as her repertoire of activities grew, as she learned to read the collective mood of the children better, and as she endured failure—she heard her professor's suggestions again in her mind's ear, and she took from them permission to change her teaching.

Tina DiFranco's Story

Tina DiFranco points us down a similar path. DeFranco's husband and at least one close friend have told her that she worries too much, that she imagines problems even when none exist. They have urged her to trust her principal, to seek help and support from her and her colleagues. DeFranco has not been able to believe her well-wishers or to take their advice. However, when she finds that she has worried through an entire night for nothing, she revisits their comments and builds a new interpretation of her situation around them.

Sonny Decker's Story

Similarly, Sonny Decker, as she confronted the real inadequacies of her spontaneous, off-the-cuff teaching style, found a solution in advice she had dismissed a few months earlier. In each of these

cases the novice teachers learn by connecting a present experience with advice or admonitions *they have already heard*. They learn from their experience what someone they admire or care about has prepared them to learn. A look at the testimony of other beginning teachers suggest that even when there is no "proposer"—no advisor, teacher, or friend whose remembered words give experience some shape and meaning—a problem may become educational if the novice is able to connect it in some useful way to past experience.

Foxfire

After struggling unsuccessfully for several months to interest 9th and 10th graders in a small Appalachian high school in "the disciplines and mysteries of English," Eliot Wigginton (1986) set himself an assignment he had first given to students: He tried to list school experiences that had contributed to his learning, either by making him feel that he could contribute to society or by introducing him to content that would matter to him as an adult. He was surprised how few such positive experiences he could recollect. However, he did manage to distill from the ones he came up with a set of principles for rethinking his teaching. On these insights he began to build an English curriculum centered around the creation of a magazine documenting Appalachian folkways. As his students became more and more deeply involved in the work of producing *Foxfire*, the classroom climate improved and teaching began to make sense.

Many beginning teachers look in vain for some useful lessons in their own past; why was Wigginton more successful in locating principles that actually helped him to teach? His narrative suggests several conjectures.

First, the crucial insights seem to grow out of his realization that he is more like his students than he is different. (Interestingly, he tells his story in a way that allows his readers to make this discovery along with him.) Although he has graduated from a prestigious college, he had been an academic failure for most of his boarding school career. Although he worked diligently on his courses, his grades were low enough to terminate his scholarship and to cause his father to write, "I am beginning to accept as a fact . . . that you have only average or a little below average ability as compared with a selected group of students, even when you work as hard as you possibly can" (p. 39). His grades—and his perception of himself—began to change only after the school literary magazine published a story he wrote.

Second, the teaching that grew out of *Foxfire* may have been better partly because it reflected Wigginton's passions more authentically than did the teaching that proceeded it. Wigginton had gone into teaching partly because he (naively) believed that a teaching career would allow him time to write. He had come to Rabun Gap because he was in love with the region—including its folklore and traditional crafts. *Foxfire* allowed him to connect his love of writing and his love of the disappearing world of Georgia country people to his teaching.

Third, his failures and frustrations as a beginning teacher may have prepared him to see the parallels between his own school experiences and those of his students. When he arrived at Rabun Gap, fresh from a successful college career, his school failures were far behind him. He seemed and felt very different from these unmotivated rural adolescents. But as a young teacher whose carefully prepared dittos and comments lined trash cans, he probably felt more like the loser many of his students felt themselves to be in school. Perhaps his confusion and despair reawakened, in a productive way, his own memories of school related failures and humiliations.

All these conjectures suggest a complex relationship between Wigginton's discoveries about himself

and the strategies and experiments that improved his teaching.

How Do They Learn?

In the vignettes I have quoted here, Tierney describes four avenues of learning: she learned by osmosis; she learned by glimpsing her own behavior through the eyes of a colleague; she learned by juxtaposing old advice and new experience; she learned by struggling with teaching problems.

Absorbing School Norms by Osmosis

To begin with, she learned by osmosis to fit into the expectations that she perceived in her new environment. Without consciously deciding to do so, she reshaped her vision of kindergarten, her goals for her classroom, to match the expectations that were visible to her in the two urban schools in which she was teaching. In doing so, she followed a well-worn and much documented path: Many researchers have described the changes in the perspectives of beginning teachers (Veenman, 1984), and many describe a similar path away from the progressive vision of the university towards a more restricted view of what is possible or desirable in school.

Tierney allows us to see how and why this happens. She and her students are part of a small enclosed society whose expectations for them appear to be clear and firm. Tierney does not have much experience as a revolutionary—on another occasion she described her younger self as "a good little Catholic girl"—and it is as natural to her to absorb these goals as it had been a few years earlier to adopt the looser, more developmental, vision of the day care center in which she had worked as a student.

Being Confronted With an Unexpected Image

But the expectations of her colleagues are not, it turns out, quite as rigid and monolithic as they at first appear. For when Tierney instinctively moves, during the art lesson, to enforce the norms she has absorbed by osmosis, the art teacher gently reproves her, commenting quietly, "It's okay, let them move, it's only natural." And at this moment Tierney learns something different, and she learns it in a different way. She learns how much she has changed, and she learns it by looking into the mirror that the art teacher (perhaps unintentionally) holds before her. The reflection she glimpses burns itself onto her consciousness. In her journal that evening, she revisits her response: "At that moment I felt like a drill sergeant"; three days later she describes it in equally dramatic terms to the other first-year teachers in the Study Group.

The art teacher's comment provides Tierney with a chance to learn in a second way: By holding up a mirror in this way, the veteran teacher confronts the novice with an unexpected—and unwelcome—image of herself. Like Tierney, we could view this second sort of learning as a possible antidote to the first. Having been made conscious of the extent to which she has unconsciously absorbed a set of norms she once questioned, Tierney now has an opportunity to analyze her situation and to choose *consciously* between two different visions of kindergarten. And even though she does not make any revolutionary decisions in consequence of this opportunity, she has clearly learned something: From now on the decisions she makes about management and about enforcing norms of behavior in her classroom must reflect a more conscious choice.

The art teacher's comment also serves to remind the rest of us that the culture that Tierney and other beginners learn by "osmosis" may sometimes be simpler than the one that exists for insiders. The quiet hallways of the traditional school evoke the hallways of our childhood, reminding us that schools are places where children are supposed to be quiet and to follow adult orders. As veteran students, beginning teachers may assume that they

know exactly what the silences and straight lines mean. If this happens they are less likely to search for pockets of dissent and will see more unanimity than actually exists. Some of the expectations they learn may be the ones that they bring with them.

Learning From a Figure in the Past

Like the first two paths of learning Tierney describes—absorbing school norms for children's behavior by osmosis, confronting the extent of her own "learning" in the wake of the art teacher's chance comment—Tierney's third is social in character. It develops from an ongoing conversation with a figure from her past. By itself, as John Dewey told us almost a century ago, experience teaches very little. We learn not from *having* an experience, Dewey claimed, but from reflecting on it. Tierney's story suggests that this reflection may be particularly likely to occur, and particularly instructive, if someone else prepares us in advance to make sense of it.

Tierney has told us in the most emphatic terms that she is temperamentally inclined to finish what she has started and that at the time that she decided to become a teacher she felt almost morally impelled to teach her students to feel the same way. During her first year of teaching she wrote often in her journal about children's misbehavior and about a general concern with discipline and management. Over and over again, both in the journal and in the Study Group, she chided herself for inconsistency and resolved to be less of a "wimp" in the future. Her first inclination, it seemed, was to interpret management and discipline problems as a sign that she needed to be stricter, firmer, more unbending.

Yet in the middle of her *second* year of teaching we hear her saying that she has learned from experience to attend more closely to the mood of her students and to plan her lessons more flexibly, to take account of what she can feel about the mood of the group as she implements her plans. Although it is important not to exaggerate the magnitude or importance of the change, to acknowledge that everyone frames problems somewhat differently on different days, it still seems important to ask what accounts for this shift in perspective, this new inclination to see modification of the task, rather than stricter and more consistent discipline, as the key to better teaching. Tierney traces the change to the words of Dr. Bancroft, a professor she respected greatly, in one of the courses she took in order to get certified. Dr. Bancroft had raised questions about Tierney's disposition to continue the activity she had planned even when the winds of student interest seemed to be blowing against her.

Dr. Bancroft's view had not held sway at the time—Tierney brought her disposition to persevere to her first classroom quite intact. Experience, however, raised questions in Tierney's mind. Often the morning did not go as she wished; children misbehaved and misused materials; they teased one another. She tried being stricter and more consistent—this seemed the obvious response, the one dictated by conventional wisdom. But new management schemes did not achieve all that she had hoped, and she continued to puzzle over her problems. As she struggled, her personal resources as a teacher increased: she learned to read the mood of the class more accurately and her reservoir of lessons and activities grew.

In her first year, she explains, every time she taught a lesson, she did so for the first time; by the middle of the second year she had a year and a half of lessons under her belt. If the one she had planned looked unpromising, she had some options. We might say, then, that a year of classroom experience had prepared her to hear Dr. Bancroft's suggestion again and to begin to act on it. Experience had raised the question to which Dr. Bancroft's suggestion now seemed like an answer, and experience had given her some of the resources she needed in order to act on that "answer."

Teachers' stories of learning from experience often feature a "proposer" like Dr. Bancroft, someone who suggests a way of looking at the self or at the problems of teaching. And often the proposer's proposition antedates the experience that makes that proposition palatable or plausible. Tina DeFranco's husband regularly argued that she was exaggerating the perils of her situation and imagining disapproval where there was merely ignorance or indifference. DeFranco, however, could not believe or act on his version of reality until her experience provided corroboration. When she saw that she had completely misread her principal's response to the misscheduled music class and that she had imagined herself into a state of terror and sleeplessness for no real reason, she heard her husband's reassurances again; this time she took them seriously and allowed them to subdue some of her inner demons.

Learning by Struggling With Conundrums

Obviously not all learning from experience grows out of the interaction of experience with the remembered words of a "proposer." Both Mimi Gelb and Carol Holtz tell stories of learning that is more solitary, less obviously mediated by others. And we ought not to overlook the fourth mode of learning embedded in Tierney's second story: learning by struggling with classroom conundrums. Alone in the kindergarten with her five-year-olds, Tierney learns to "read the class," to anticipate what will happen next. When she talks about this development, Tierney echoes the hopes of prospective teachers who seem to be looking forward to this sort of learning when they talk about all that they will "learn from experience." (It's worth noting, though, that learning to read the class touches Tierney's teaching most powerfully after she has found ways to address more personal issues.)

Often the path to learning is difficult to trace. What, for example, prompted Eliot Wigginton (1986) to ask himself the same questions he had asked his students? For his own narrative suggests that it was the answers to these questions, more than any other single thing that happened to him in Rabun Gap, that suggested a way out of the dilemmas that were stalling his teaching. Perhaps the political and cultural climate of the late 1960s played a role: At a moment when young people on college campuses and public streets all over the country were questioning authority, it may have felt natural for a teacher to turn the tables on himself, to pose to himself the assignment he set his students.

What these stories do make clear is that beginning teachers, like the rest of us, learn from experience what their past experience has prepared them to learn. They get precious little outside help in making sense of what happens to them, in interpreting it in new ways—in ways that have not yet been proposed. Many reflect endlessly, hectically, on their experience, but they bring to bear on this experience only the resources they have brought to the classroom on the first day, along with the clean new attendance book.

Conclusion

These narratives do not tell us *all* about what beginning teachers learn from experience. They do not invalidate other versions of this education, other ways of looking at the Herculean task young college graduates face as they try to shape themselves into teachers. But they do remind us how complex and personal the learning of beginning teachers is. Just as readers of a short story construct their own meanings from the text, shaping their version of the author's meaning from what they already know from the life and the self they bring to that encounter with the printed page, so beginning teachers stitch a personal education out of the fabric of a year of teaching experience.

They learn about themselves, especially about themselves as teachers. Often they fight with these newly revealed selves and endeavor to change them. They engage in a struggle that is both

emotional and intellectual. All this in virtual isolation, armed only with the weapons they brought to their first classroom—the images of themselves, of teaching, and of schools, the words of professors, spouses, fiancés, friends, parents, and siblings.

Role of Teacher Educators

Where does this leave teacher educators? What role can they play in an education that takes place away from the university, after the conclusion of the teacher preparation program? Several points seem worth making.

First, Tierney's story indicates that the voices of teacher educators sometimes echo forward into these first years of teaching; the novice sometimes rehears, with a new ear, propositions which have seemed to make little impact on them at the time they were offered. Certainly teacher educators cannot count on this sort of sleeper effect, but they can comfort themselves with the thought that their ideas may sometimes resurface as the answers to questions posed by classroom experience. It happened for Tierney, and Sonny Decker tells a parallel story about her "discovery" of the value of lesson plans.

Second, the learning that seems especially powerful connects intimately with the conscious crafting of an identity, with the discovery and reshaping of the self. This observation connects closely to the commonplace finding that beginning teachers complain more about management and discipline than about any other category of difficulty. Learning to manage a classroom is partly a matter of learning to get and to exercise authority. To many who find themselves in schools where students challenge adult authority routinely and energetically, getting authority can seem more a matter of changing *who they are* than of learning different things to *do* (see, for example, Marshall, 1972). They are recreating themselves even as they learn new skills.

The idea that personal development ought to play a role in the education of prospective teachers has a long history. It was central to the design of the University of Texas's Personalized Teacher Education Program and also figured in Bank Street College's advisement program (Feiman-Nemser, 1989). The teachers quoted in these pages—like those surveyed by Arthur Jersild almost 40 years ago (Jersild, 1955)—suggest that the work of teaching (perhaps especially the challenge of managing the behavior of others for six hours a day) creates conditions where introspection and struggle are both more likely and more necessary than they are during the student years.

It may be, therefore, that while preservice teacher educators ought to ask themselves what they are doing to *prepare* their students to look inward, the most promising opportunities for helping students make the most of these glimpses of new parts of their own character will be found in five-year programs which continue the candidate's connection with a university through an internship year. To the extent that interns function as real teachers, rather than simply as more experienced student teachers, young adults in these programs will have more access to university educators during a crucial stage of their education. In most programs they will also participate regularly in groups that include other teachers, either novices like themselves or more experienced teachers who are working towards advanced degrees. These changes ought to create new possibilities for learning during the rookie year. (Jill McConaghy [1991] has shown how a group of teachers who gather regularly to tell stories about their teaching can create new knowledge and new ways to interpret experience.)

But it seems to me that this will only happen if we think more deeply about what is involved in exploring the self and what role others can profitably play in this process. And here the narratives of teacher-writers—people like Herbert Kohl (1967), Vivian Paley (1974, 1984, 1990),

James Herndon (1965), Jesse Stuart (1989), Leo Tolstoy (1967), Eliot Wigginton (1986), and George Dennison (1969)—may provide us with invaluable guidance. For all of these teacher-writers describe a complex interplay between self-discovery and their explorations of individual students and subject matter. Perhaps their stories can help us to see aspects of this journey more clearly.

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